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ABSTRACT

The increasing emphasis on work force development as a policy goal is bringing to the forefront a continuing debate over which of two roads--work force education or literacy development--the field of adult education should take. The recent shift in the welfare reform policy from emphasis on investing in basic and job skills to emphasis on quick job placement has caused many adult educators who had previously worked closely with human services agencies to feel "out of the loop." Increasingly, evidence from adult learners themselves and from research on welfare-to-work programs is demonstrating that policies focusing solely on expanding the low-wage labor supply without attention to raising living standards through opportunities for development of skills that can be transferred to multiple employment settings do not result in employment self-sufficiency. Based on the information in the literature, the question should not be "Should adult education focus on either work force education or literacy development?" but rather "Is it possible to combine both literacy development and work force education?" The Goodwill Literacy Initiative in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) and Philadelphia's (Pennsylvania) Community Women's Education Project confirm that adult educators can indeed take both roads. (Contains 12 references) (MN)

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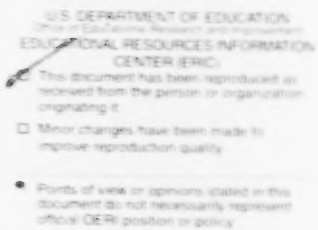
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by Susan Imel

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Work Force Education or Literacy Development: Which Road Should Adult Education Take?

The world of work continues to change rapidly. Many workers will need to upgrade their skills and some will need to be retrained for entirely new jobs. Providing educational opportunities to these adult workers will lengthen their productive years and will also benefit the economy by creating a more flexible and more highly trained workforce. (**U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan, 1998-2002**, 1997, p. 39)

Our democratic institutions depend upon and are sustained by an educated citizenry. While moving from welfare to the workforce and creating economic advancement are valid outcomes of education, democracy demands much more. Democratic life requires critical inquiry, civic participation, and a commitment to the common good. (Auchter 1998, p. 2)

During the past few years, the nation's economic needs have driven many of the policy discussions within education. At the federal level, Congress has considered and debated bills that would consolidate a number of educational programs—including adult basic education and vocational education—into omnibus work force development and training bills. Provisions for block grants that would allow states greater autonomy and latitude in making decisions about how the funds are used have been included in these proposed acts. None of these education bills has passed, but the debate continues. In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. More commonly known as the Welfare Reform Act, this legislation not only created sweeping changes in welfare policies that affected education and training, it also provided block grants that give states greater flexibility (Nathan 1997). A number of states have responded to the move at the federal level toward greater state autonomy and control by merging education, human services, and employment service agencies to create "super agencies" to oversee state work force development efforts, including adult basic education, welfare reform, and vocational education (Jurmo 1996).

The increasing emphasis on work force development as a policy goal is bringing to the forefront a continuing debate within the field of adult basic education. Although adults frequently enroll in adult basic education for job-related reasons, the programs themselves have always had broader goals. In an effort to shed light on current perspectives about the goals and purposes of adult basic education, this ***Digest*** reviews recent literature and suggests solutions to what frequently becomes an "either-or" debate.

The Current Context: Its Impact on Adult Basic Education

The current context is shaped not only by the policy emphasis on education for work-related reasons but also by changes brought about by the Welfare Reform Act. The new law changes the focus of welfare reform from an approach that invests in building basic and job skills to an approach that emphasizes quick job placement. As a result, many states are reevaluating the role of education and training (Strawn 1997). Although adult educators previously may have worked closely with human services agencies to provide basic skills training, they may now feel "out of the loop" because they are "being left out of the bureaucratic spider web resulting from welfare reform" (Fluke 1998, p. 4).

According to Fluke, across Pennsylvania there are stories "about some of the better-prepared, motivated adult students, forced to drop out of literacy, numeracy, and writing classes to enter 20-hour-per week jobs" (ibid., p. 4). In one case, because she could not manage the multiple demands of her family, the job requirement, and college, a student dropped out of a 2-year postsecondary training program (ibid.). In a similar vein, Reuys (1996) reports on a Massachusetts program that previously had no difficulty in attracting and retraining students, but is now being affected negatively by changes in the welfare and work force development systems, including the 20-hour per week work requirement, restrictions on funding for education, and reductions in funding for basic and prevocational education from sources such as the Job Training Partnership Act. Although anecdotal in nature, these reports are indicative of how legislative and policy changes are affecting adult learners and providers of adult basic education.

In the current context, adult educators may feel caught in the middle. If they want to be participants in the policy discussions at the state level and partners at the local level in providing educational services to the broad spectrum of work force development customers, they may be excluded by funders if their programs cannot meet the goals of work force development. How can they defend the need for their programs to have broader goals yet still meet the needs of funders? Evidence from adult learners themselves and from research on welfare-to-work programs provides helpful information.

Broadening the Debate

Other factors in the current context can help adult educators broaden the debate about the goals and purposes of literacy education. Two that are discussed here are what adult learners themselves want from education and the results of research on welfare-to-work programs.

In 1993, the National Institute for Literacy initiated an effort to develop a "customer-driven, standards-based reform process" called ***Equipped for the Future*** (EFF) (Stein 1997, p. 1). EFF began by asking adult learners the following question: "What is it that adults need to know and be able to do in order to be literate, compete in the global economy, and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship?" (ibid., p. 2). Using the responses of more than 1,500 adults, the EFF project is currently developing standards grouped around three major adult roles—worker, citizen, and family member—based on four fundamental purposes for adult learning: the ability to (1) access information, (2) express ideas and opinions confidently, (3) take independent action, and (4) learn how to learn in order to keep up with the changing world. The adult learners responding to the survey clearly saw the role of education as much broader than only preparation for work.

Increasingly, evidence demonstrates that the emphasis on just getting people into employment will not result in employment for self-sufficiency. Baldwin (1998) used the term "low-road strategies" (p. 60) to refer to policies that merely focus on expanding the low-wage labor supply without attention to raising living standards through opportunities for the development of skills that can be transferred to multiple employment settings. A synthesis of research

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on welfare-to-work programs (Strawn 1997) revealed that neither programs emphasizing job-search strategies nor those focusing on adult education had long-term effectiveness in increasing participants' earnings and job tenure. Instead, "the most effective welfare-to-work programs share a balanced approach that mixes job search, education, job training, and paid and unpaid work experience" (ibid., p. [2]).

Narrowing the focus of adult basic education to job development activities does not make sense. Although participants in programs focusing on job-search methods may have initial success in the current labor market, in the long term they may be stuck in dead-end jobs or become unemployed in economic downturns. Adult educators must become advocates for programs that will support the goals of all their customers as well as those of funders.

"Either/Or" or "Both"

Based on the information in the literature, the question should not be "Should adult education focus on either work force education or literacy development?" but rather "Is it possible to combine both literacy development and work force education?" Learners come to adult basic education and literacy programs with many different goals. Although programs need to focus on how they can serve these goals, they should not try to be all things to all people (Quigley 1997). Some programs may decide, therefore, that providing work force education does not fit with their philosophy and purpose. That does not mean, however, that work force education is not a valid goal and purpose for adult education. In fact, many programs successfully engage in both literacy development and work force education.

The Goodwill Literacy Initiative (GLI) in Pittsburgh is an example of a program that combines adult basic education with work force development. GLI believes that for their students, "work often provides self-esteem, and even for those who have few immediate job prospects, a job-related curriculum and learning environment may provide intrinsic rewards and progressive achievements that are sufficient to keep students in class until they can find appropriate employment" (Hopkins, Aaronson, and Yenerall 1995, p. 5). Even with a mission related to work force and literacy development, GLI implemented a number of changes that improved overall retention. These enhancements included adding a formal orientation, assigning a case manager to each student to provide emotional and structural support, and providing career exploration and development services.

Philadelphia's Community Women's Education Project (CWEP) is an example of a program whose philosophy emphasizes the questioning of existing political and social conditions but that also provides education within the work force education system. The CWEP program features a feminist and multicultural ideology, emphasizes the personal and political empowerment of participants, employs a participatory approach to teaching and learning, and promotes the value of postsecondary education rather than short-term skills training. According to D'Amico (1997), "CWEP has been able to convince [its funders] of the validity of its approach despite ideological opposition" (p. 47).

Adult education programs wishing to combine work force education and literacy development can also learn from a study (Quint, forthcoming, cited in D'Amico 1997) of adult education programs that provide work force development for welfare reform clients. Among the promising practices identified were the following: a well-defined mission; separate classes specifically for welfare reform clients; skilled, experienced teachers; an emphasis on staff development; varied instructional approaches that involve active learning; frequent communication about students' progress between educators and human service staff; a stress on regular attendance, with aggressive follow-up for absences; relatively intensive class schedules; and a high degree of teacher-student and student-student interaction (p. 41). This study concluded that successful programs shared the following attributes: a clear concept of participants' education and other needs, support for teachers' efforts to innovate and experiment in the classroom, and sufficient funding to implement innovative ideas.

Information on programs that have successfully combined work force education and literacy development demonstrates that adult educators can take both roads. They do not have to choose either/or but, indeed, can do both.

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